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ABSTRACT

To learn whether the problem of misunderstanding in brand names might be caused by the content of advertisements or whether it stemmed from a failure in the exposure-processing chain with respect to the effect of the ads on consumers, a study investigated the extent to which marketers provide information in their advertising that clarifies the meanings of their brand names. The advertisements selected for inclusion in the study were all taken from the 12 most recent monthly editions of "Better Homes and Gardens" and "Good Housekeeping." A content analysis was done on 52 print advertisements for 39 products. Results indicated that (1) 40% of the ads provided no clarifying explanation; (2) 20% of the ads provided only a partial explanation; and (3) 60% of the ads provided only partial or no explanations of ambiguous brand names. (One table of data is included.) (MS)

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Deception in Brand Names: Do Print Ads Clarify the Nutrition Claims?

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About a year ago, both authors became acutely aware of the dangers of high blood level cholesterol. Needless to say, dietary changes were accompanied by a heightened awareness of products which promised such benefits as low, no, lite, and natural ingredients which would alleviate the dreaded cardiovascular high risk distinction. However, both authors discovered that the use of these descriptive terms in food product advertising often provided little or no substantive information about the brand advertised.

Indeed, Reece and Ducoffe (1987) noted the high degree of uncertainty and inaccuracy associated with shoppers' understanding of the meanings of certain key, descriptive terms used in brand names for food products. These key terms included some which have been defined by the Food and Drug Administration (such as low calorie, reduced-calorie, and diet) as well as some which have no legal standards (such as natural, light, and lean). Although Reece and Ducoffe (1987) reported the extent to which inaccuracy and ambiguity occured with respect to these brand names (subjects' inaccurate beliefs consisted of about 50% of the total number of beliefs tested in association with the key words) they did not discuss possible causes of this problem.

While gender and age were demographic variables that related to the level of misunderstanding, product category and brand usage were unrelated. It might be expected that consumers with brand experience would have a greater understanding of the key terms. However, even consumers who were users of the brands, and thus, would have had the packages in their homes, were not

consistently more accurate in their understanding of the key terms than consumers who were unfamiliar with the brands.

There are several reasons why consumers may be unable to describe accurately the meanings of these brand names. One is a possible miscomprehension of information provided by the brands' marketers. It is possible that marketers explain what these terms mean either in their advertisements or on their packages, but consumers do not read/hear or retain the information. A second reason is the failure of the marketers to provide a clear definition of terms that have several potential meanings.

Rather than speculate about the relative contribution of each of these factors to the misunderstanding phenomenon, the authors chose to evaluate the degree of explanation advertisers provide for brand names which use these somewhat ambiguous terms. As the possibility of consumer miscomprehension assumes that marketers provide information which could be miscomprehended, an initial investigation into the presence of such information provides a basis for further inquiry.

Without adequate explanation, usage of the key terms is potentially deceptive. As defined by the FTC, "deception will be found when a `material' misrepresentation, omission, or practice is likely to mislead reasonable consumers...The materiality of a claim is determined by its likelihood of affecting consumer choice, and the Commission considers all claims related to health to be material. Because many of the brand names that have come under recent attack seem to imply health benefits, their claims would appear to be material within the FTC's current guidelines." (Reece and Ducoffe 1987, p.94)

Marketers have a number of communication channels they can use to disseminate specific information about their products. Among these are the brand's package or label and the brand's advertising. Although marketers have considerable freedom with respect to the design and execution of their packages and advertising, they must also comply with governmental and self-regulatory guidelines.

Federal regulations set minimum standards for labeling most food products with regard to ingredient lists and health or nutrition claims (FDA, 1986). Thus, when words included in the Food and Drug Administration guidelines are part of the the brand name, marketers must provide information on the package that spells out how the product meets or exceeds these minimum standards. Marketers are free to add other truthful information to their packages that goes beyond the minimum standards which might help attract attention on the shelf and persuade shoppers to purchase by clarifying words used in the brand name. It appears, however, that many shoppers either do not read or do not retain this explanatory material (Reece and Ducoffe, 1987).

With rare exceptions, such as the warning labels in cigarette advertisements, marketers have considerable control over the content of their advertising. Although ads must meet media standards of taste as well as media and regulatory standards of truth, marketers are under no obligation to provide information in their advertising.

The focus of this particular investigation is on the extent to which marketers do provide information in their advertising

that clarifies the meanings of their brand names. It is not our intention to enter the battle regarding what constitutes information in a general sense. Rather, we looked for specific information relevant to the problem of misunderstanding in brand names. We hoped to learn whether the problem might be caused by the content of the advertisements or whether it stemmed from a failure in the exposure-processing chain with respect to the effect of the ads on consumers.

METHODS

Data Collection

The advertisements selected for inclusion in this study were all taken from the twelve most recent monthly editions of Better Homes and Gardens and Good Housekeeping. Print ads rather than broadcast were used for two reasons. First, the use of magazines enabled us to conduct a complete census of appropriate ads, whereas the use of broadcast (television) would have required sampling and a resultant ommission of many commercials that fit our criteria. Second, and more importantly, advertisements in the print media are generally considered to be more informative than those in broadcast (Stern, Krugman, Resnik, 1981); therefore, marketers would be more likely to explain the meanings of their brand names in print than in television.

We selected the particular vehicles used in this study on the basis of recent Simmons data on magazines with a female orientation. Recent studies have shown that although males have increased the amount of time they spend shopping, females

continue to have more responsibility for this family activity (Hawes 1987). Better Homes and Garden, a home service magazine, had the highest average audience among women 18 and over, while Good Housekeeping, a women's magazine, had the second highest average audience. We assumed that those vehicles with the highest audiences would be most likely to attract advertisers of the food products we were examining. In addition, since we were interested in determining the potential for consumer miscomprehension, we felt that the two highest average audience magazines would provide a wide exposure for the all of the ads in each of these magazines.

We collected any advertisement from these vehicles that was sponsored by a product whose brand name included a term used in the Reece and Ducoffe study (1987). These terms included: diet, lean, lite, lo-cal, lo-sugar, natural, plus, reduced-calorie, sugar-free, and trim. We also collected ads for brands whose names included words that were related to those on the original list. Thus we added low sodium, no (as in salt or sugar), sugarless, free, and real.

We eliminated ads for non-food products and for pet foods in order to concentrate on those that had health or nutritional implications for consumers. After discarding duplicates, we were left with 52 print advertisements for 39 products.

Data Analysis

Both researchers independently categorized each advertisement using a content analysis based on the degree of explanation present. We evaluated both the label or package of the product if it was included in the illustration and the body copy of the

advertisement. We used three categories to represent the various levels of information available.

An ad was categorized as "no explanation" if the advertiser made no attempt to clarify the meaning of the key term. An ad was categorized as "partial explanation" if the advertiser provided a definition which used other ambiguous terms or if the definition was not clearly quantified. An ad was categorized as "complete explanation" if either on the package or in the text, the advertiser provided a clear definition of what the key term meant.

When the two researchers disagreed about how an ad should be categorized, we discussed our points of view until agreement was reached. The number of ads upon which we initially disagreed was very small (the percentage agreement, or inter-rater reliability was 90.4%). The disagreement involved issues of how much prior knowledge a consumer might need to have in order to understand the current ad completely. The researchers used their own judgments, and completely agreed, in terms of the knowledge of the ad's target audience, in order to determine whether the ad provided a complete or a partial explanation.

Once the ads were categorized we looked for similarity in explanation level based on the key word used.

RESULTS

Most of the fifteen words were observed (in some form) in the 52 ads reviewed. Table 1 lists the brands advertised by their key words. Also included in Table 1 is the respective product category, manufacturer and explanation categorization.

BRAND	KEY WORD	PRODUCT	MANUFACTURER	EXPLANATION
diet Coke	diet	soft drink	Coca-Cola	Complete
diet Min. Maid	diet	soft drink	Coca-Cola	Complete
diet Sprite	diet	soft drink	Coca-Cola	Complete
Carefree	free	gum	Nabisco	no
Freedent	free	gum	Wrigley	Complete
Hormel	lean	meats	Hormel	Partial
Lean Cuisine 1	lean	frozen din.	Stouffer	Complete
Lean Cuisine 2	lean	frozen din.	Stouffer	Complete
Lean Cuisine 3	lean	forzen din.	Stouffer	Complete
Lean Cuisine 4	lean	frozen din.	Stouffer	Complete
Aunt Jemima	lite	syrup	Quaker	Partial
Del Monte 1	lite	canned fruit	Del Monte	Partial
Del Monte 2	lite	canned fruit	Del Monte	Partial
Fleischmann 1	lite	margarine	Nabisco	Complete
Fleischmann 2	lite	margarine	Nabisco	Complete
Fleischman 3	lite	margarine	Nabisco	Complete
Hellman's	lite	mayonnaise	Best	Complete
Hormel	lite	meats	Hormel	Partial
Light n'Lively	lite	cottage cheese	Kraft	Complete
Light n'Lively	lite	yogurt	Kraft	Partial
Lite-Line	lite	cheese	Borden	Complete
Lipton 1	lite	soup	Lipton	Partial
Lipton 2	lite	soup	Lipton	no
Marie's	lite	dressing	Specialty	Complete
Miracle Whip 1	lite	dressing	Kraft	Complete
Miracle Whip 2	lite	dressing	Kraft	Complete
Wishbone 1	lite	dressing	Lipton	Partial
Wishbone 2	lite	dressing	Lipton	Partial
Wishbone 3	lite	dressing	Lipton	Partial
Wonder	lite	bread	Ralston-Pur.	Complete
L.S. Triscuit	low	crackers	Nabisco	no
L.S. Wheat Th.	low	crackers	Nabisco	no
L.S. Premium	low	crackers	Nabisco	no
L.S. Ritz	low	crackers	Nabisco	no
L.S. Bet.Ched.	low	crackers	Nabisco	no
Campbell's	low sodium	soup	Campbell	no
Adolph's	natural	tenderizer	Adolph	no
Baker's	natural	chocolate	Gen. Foods	no
Breyers	natural	yogurt	Kraft	no
Breyers	natural	yogurt	Kraft	no
Folgers	natural	coffee	P & G	no
Molly McB.	natural	sprinkles	Alb. Cul.	no
Uncle Ben's 1	natural	rice	Uncle Ben's	no
Uncle Ben's 2	natural	rice	Uncle Ben's	no
NoSalt	no	spice	Norcliff	Partial
Welch's	no	juice	Welch's	Complete
Citrus Hill	plus	juice	P & G	Complete
Hellman's 1	real	mayonnaise	Best	no
Hellman's 2	real	mayonnaise	Best	no
Hellman's 3	real	mayonnaise	Best	no
Hellman's 4	real	mayonnaise	Best	no
ReaLemon	real	juice	Borden	Complete
Budget Gourt.	slim	frozen din.	All Amer.	Complete
Carefree	sugarless	gum	Nabisco	no
Fibre Trim 1	trim	diet aid	Schering	Complete
Fibre Trim 2	trim	diet aid	Schering	Complete

Table 1

Explanation of Advertised Brand Names by Key Word

A total of 37 brands were advertised in the 52 advertisments.

Twenty-two ads (42.3%) provided complete explanations, 10 ads (19.2%) provided partial explanations and 20 (38.5%) ads provided no explanations of the key terms studied. More than half (57.7%) of the ads we examined provided insufficient information for the consumer to know exactly what was meant by the key term.

The complete explanations typically consisted of quantifications of particular product attributes, either in absolute terms or in comparative terms, such as a percentage of an attribute found in the brand's regular form (25% less calories than regular margarine). Partial explanations typically consisted of an attempt at defining the term, but with the use of incomplete comparative statements or with other ambiguous terms which necessitate further definition or quantification, in order for the consumer to understand what the term means. Advertisements categorized as providing no explanation, typically did not provide any attempt at defining or describing the term used.

Seven of the key terms were observed in more than one advertisement. Lite was observed in 20 ads for 12 different brands, natural was observed in 8 ads for 6 different brands, lean was observed in 5 ads for 2 brands, real was observed in 5 ads for 2 brands, low was observed in 6 ads for 6 different brands, trim was observed twice for one brand, and free was observed twice for two brands.

The remaining six key terms (diet, no, plus, slim, sugarless) were each observed once: each term was found in one ad.

The most frequently used key word, lite, was observed in 20 ads for twelve different brands. Ten of the ads presented an explanation of the term, lite, and in each of these instances the explanation was on the product label which was pictured in the advertisment. In five instances, the product label explanations were supplemented with copy explanations of the key term. In no instance was a text explanation of a key term presented without a corresponding label explanation.

One ad presented no explanation of the word lite either on the label or in the ad copy. Nine ads referred to a product attribute along which the brand could be considered lite (six only on the label, one only in the ad copy and one in copy and on label), however statements about the attribute were incomplete comparatives, or unquantified levels of an attibute. For example, Aunt Jemima lite syrup claims to have "50% fewer calories", Hormel lite and lean cold cuts state on the label, "little calories", Wishbone lite dressing states on the label that is has "reduced calories". Each of these statements utilizes terms which the authors have defined as the ambiguous terms being studied. Consequently, these nine ads present attempts to define their names, however, utilize minimal information in their definitions.

One ad sponsored by the Coca-Cola company for three different brands of soft drink, used the term diet. No explanation of the term diet was presented on the section of the soft drink cans which were pictured in the ads or in the copy of the ad. However, the word Nutrasweet and its logo were clearly presented

in the advertisement and on the soft drink cans. Consequently, an explanation of the term diet was present for those familiar with the brand name, Nutrasweet, and its function as an artificial sweetener with no calories.

Lean was observed in five ads, four of which were for Stouffer's Lean Cuisine frozen dinners. As the Lean Cuisine packaging contains a calorie count on the front of the box, and each ad pictured the product, the term lean was always explained through the picture of the label. In addition, the copy of three of the four ads provided explanation of the term lean with another statement of the calorie count associated with the dinners.

No explanation was observed for Hormel Lite and Lean cold cuts which were pictured in a two page spread of an abundance of Hormel products. The lean product was not emphasized, and term lean could only be observed after careful scrutiny of the brand labels pictured in the ad. This ad was also included in the previous analysis of the word lite for its lack of explanation of lite. However, the ad was only counted once in the total number of advertisements.

The term, low, was used in six different ads. Five of the ads were sponsored by Nabisco for their low salt cracker products. One ad was for Campbell's low sodium soup. In each of these ads, the term low was used in conjunction with the words sodium or salt. Low was not explained in any of these ads, and low sodium/salt was not quantified.

Natural was observed in eight different ads for six different brands, and was neither explained in the copy of any of

the advertisements nor on the labels of any of the pictured products.

The term free was observed in two ads. Freedent gum explained the term in the text only. Carefree sugarless gum (also using the term, sugarless) explained neither free nor sugarless on the package or in the copy of the ad.

Plus was observed in one ad for Citrus Hill Plus. Plus was explained on the label and in the copy as an addition of calcium to the orange juice.

Real was observed in five ads. In four different ads, Hellman's Real Mayonnaise did not explain the term real, but ReaLemon explained on the label, but not in the ad copy, that it contained lemon juice from concentrate.

The term slim was used in one ad for Budget Gourmet Slim frozen dinners and was explained with a calorie count in the copy, but not on the label.

Trim was observed in two ads for Fibre Trim which was explained as a diet aid in the copy, but not on the label.

Finally, the term no was observed in two ads. Welch's No Sugar Added frozen juice concentrate provided an explanation on the label and in the ad copy, but NoSalt was less clear in their explanation of the term. On the label and in the copy, a reference was made to the fact that the product was a salt alternative. This statement reflects what the product is not as compared to the actual content of the product.

In summary, the authors found explanations for brand name terms in 22 ads, no explanations in 20 ads, and partial

explanations in 10 ads. The explanations typically consisted of quantifications of particular product attributes, either in absolute terms or in comparative terms, such as a percentage of an attribute found in the brand's regular form (25% less calories than regular margarine). Advertisements categorized as providing no explanation typically did not provide any attempt at defining or describing the term used. However, partial explanations typically consisted of an attempt at defining the term, but with the use of incomplete comparative statements or with other ambiguous terms which necessitate further definition or quantification for a complete understanding of the term used in the brand name.

The most frequently observed key terms which were used by various brands were lite, natural, and low. Both natural and low were not defined or explained in any of the ads in which they appeared, leaving the consumer to infer the meaning of these terms. Lite was either completely (in 10 ads) or partially (in 9 ads) explained, typically across the attributes of calories, fat content, salt content and cholesterol content.

DISCUSSION

There are limitations to the research presented here. The advertisements in the study came from only two vehicles and covered only one year of publication. It is possible that ads for these brands in other vehicles or other media provided fuller explanations than those we observed. Likewise, the ads early in the product life cycle of these brands might have provided more details as to what the key terms meant. Nevertheless, the two magazines used for sampling ads in this study had the highest

average audience figures, and represent the type of information many consumers have been exposed to in the past year.

We suspect that the number of products which use these ambiguous key terms in their brand names is growing. Consequently, it was surprising that we found so few ads in the chosen vehicles within a one year time frame. In addition, of the fifty-two ads we discovered, twenty or almost 40 percent of the ads provided no explanation, and ten or almost 20 percent of the ads provided only partial explanation. A total of 30 or almost 60 percent of the ads we discovered provided only partial (typically ambiguous) or no explanations of ambiguous brand names. Such ambiguity, on the part of the advertiser, leaves room for consumer inference. The potentially misleading nature of such inferences has been discussed by Harris (1977, 1983) as a claim-belief advertising deception.

Harris (1977) has studied one type of advertising deception (as developed by Gardner (1975)), namely, the "claim-belief interaction, by which the advertisement 'interacts with the accumulated attitudes and beliefs of the consumer in such a manner as to leave a deceptive belief or attitude about the product or service being advertised, without making either explicit or implicit deceptive claims'" (Harris 1977, p. 603).

Several studies support the contention that consumers have a strong tendency to infer product claims (see Harris 1977, Harris 1983, Monaco and Keiser 1983) and that consumers have a tenedency to accept their own product inferences as fact (Harris 1977, 1983). Indeed, inferential beliefs can have a strong impact on

product evaluations (Huber and McCann 1982). As inferences are formed based on past experiences, preferences, and expectations (see Monaco and Keiser 1983), the use of ambiguous terms in brand names could mislead consumers to construct a product attribute profile, based on the individual consumer's expectations, desires or past experiences.

Many of the food products we observed were aimed at a "health/diet-oriented" market. Clearly, individuals seeking products which will help them lose weight or lower blood cholesterol levels will infer certain product attributes about products with names that use words such as diet, lean, low, slim, trim and lite. Ads for lean and some lite products provided calorie counts, but several lite product ads did not. In addition, all of the ads for product using the term natural made no attempts to explain the term. An abundance of inferences can be made with respect to a "natural" product so that the use of the term natural could be an advertiser's dream or a legal nightmare.

Advertisers may desire such consumer inferences as consumer's may be more likely to purchase products which they believe have preferred attributes. However, advertisers of food products ought to be concerned about the findings of the study reported here: almost sixty percent of the observed ads provide consumers with the opportunity for the inference of product claims.

Consumers who are misled by the brand name to believe a product will deliver certain benefits that cannot be delivered will be disappointed consumers. When reasonable consumers are

misled by a material representation, omission, or practice, deception occurs; and the advertiser could be subject to prosecution by the Federal Trade Commision. Even when deception does not occur in a legal sense, advertisers must consider the consequences of negative word of mouth advertising from dissatisfied customers. Advertisers should also be concerned with the possibility that consumers' lack of understanding of brand name meanings causes them to underestimate a brands' benefits and thus choose not to purchase it.

This problem merits advertisers' concern, and we hope that the results of our study encourage advertisers to include more specific information in their ads in an effort to minimize the potentially deceptive nature of the use of ambiguous brand names.

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